

Have you ever noticed how some American “Christians” practice their faith the way hungry people graze at a buffet table? A little bit of this. A smidgeon of that. A little bit of Christianity. A dollop of Buddhism. A sprinkling of Hinduism. Since God is the God of all truth, people can learn some things from a variety of religions and faiths, right?

Technically true, but in the final analysis all people need to choose to whom and what we will give our hearts and lives.

That is, in essence, Elijah’s message for the Israelite community in 1 Kings 18 and the meaning of the drama that plays out on Mount Carmel for us. For more than two years God has sealed up the heavens so that no rain or dew has fallen on Israel or much of the rest of the Middle East. So whose fault is this terrible drought? King Ahab implies that it’s Elijah’s fault. He, after all, refers to the prophet as “*the troubler of Israel,*” perhaps because he announced that God would send this drought. Elijah, however, declares that Ahab and his father’s family have “*made trouble*” for Israel because he has abandoned the Lord’s commands, incurring God’s wrath.

Elijah, however, isn’t interested in a theological debate. He wants a public confrontation that will provoke a religious decision. So the prophet challenges Ahab to invite Baal’s prophets for a showdown on Mount Carmel.

Once everyone has finally gathered, Elijah first confronts the Israelites. In one sense, he does “trouble” them here. The prophet tries to shake Israel out of her moral and religious complacency. How long, Elijah thunders at them, will they *waver*, literally, “limp” between two opinions? How long, in other words, will the Israelites divide their religious loyalties between the living God of Israel and the Canaanite storm gods of Baal?

By splitting their religious tickets, as it were, the children of Israel didn’t worship God in the way that God desires. They were sinfully adopting the religious practices of the Canaanites among whom they lived. They were trying to graft the worship of Baal onto their worship of the living God. Yahweh, however, is a jealous God who permits no competition. The Lord doesn’t want to be just one god among many. God wants to be the one and only object of our love, worship and devotion.

In twenty-first century America it’s easy to forget that. You and I, after all, live in a society that claims to promote tolerance of a wide variety of religious and other beliefs. Such tolerance is in many ways necessary in a pluralistic society like ours. But 1 Kings 18 gives us an opportunity to explore what it can mean to be Christian in a religiously pluralistic society. What are the threats to one’s wholehearted love and worship of *the one*

*true God?* How much of another religion's wisdom can we borrow and graft onto our own faith without compromising our primary devotion to the living God?

Perhaps the Israelites in this Scripture find such questions as hard to answer as some of us do. They, after all, remain silent when Elijah asks them if they will quit straddling the religious "fence." Yet, I'd say, by refusing to choose either Yahweh or Baal, they have chosen Baal by default. Before the Israelites, including the four hundred fifty active prophets of Baal, Elijah seems to finally recognize he alone worships Yahweh with his whole heart, soul and mind.

For now, however, that doesn't intimidate him. Elijah arranges a dramatic confrontation between Baal and the living God. Interestingly, however, he arranges this on Baal's turf, so to speak. Elijah's challenge goes right to the heart of Baal's supposed specialty. The object, after all, is to light an altar fire.

Certainly, Baal should be able to handle this assignment. Remember, after all, that he is supposedly the god of, among other things, lightning. His followers believe that he's a specialist at throwing down lightning from heaven. So, while Baal may not be able to immediately send Israel rain, he certainly should be able to light a little altar fire. Shouldn't he?

Notice, too, how Elijah stacks the odds against Yahweh right from the start. Baal has many allies "on the ground." There are, after all, four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah. What's more, Ahab and Jezebel are against him and his own people have divided loyalties.

On top of that, the prophet allows Baal's prophets to go first, in a kind of "sudden death" contest. If Baal somehow manages to light the altar first, he would win. So, if this were a kind of football playoff game, Yahweh might never even get a chance to have the ball. Even with all these advantages, Baal and his prophets prove to be impotent. While the prophets are frantic and hyperactive, their god remains hushed. For hours the prophets beg Baal to throw down just one bolt of lightning. The skies, however, remain clear and the altar remains unlit.

This leads Elijah to act somewhat like a kind of sore winner. He pokes fun at Baal's frustrated prophets. "*Shout louder!*" he eggs them on. "*Maybe your god is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be wakened.*" Or as some Bible translations hint, "*he's in the bathroom.*"

Baal and his allies seem overwhelmed from a human standpoint. From God's perspective, however, they're simply laughable—a joke. Baal's allies are also, however, from God's point of view, exploitative and abusive. That's because they promote worship of a god who is no god at all. So you see, Baal's prophets lead their followers down a one-way path that leads to death.

Elijah's mockery only frustrates Baal's allies even more. So they shout louder and mutilate themselves with swords and spears until they draw blood. By doing so, biblical scholars note that Baal's prophets essentially mourn his death. After all, the Canaanites believed that the death god, Mot, once swallowed Baal and temporarily ended fertility. Mourning Baal's death, the god El then cut himself much the way the prophets do here. Therefore, by mutilating themselves, Baal's allies are mourning for Baal much like another god had once mourned his death.

There is, however, one God for whom no one need mourn: Yahweh. God now proves that he is very alive. Yet as if the odds weren't already astronomical against him, Elijah publicly "ups the ante." He virtually floods Yahweh's altar with water. He also does nothing but pray to God to reveal himself as the living God. Then, unlike Baal's prophets who frantically seek their god's power, Elijah simply steps aside and lets God do the work.

And God, in gracious response to Elijah's passionate prayer to show his power to his people, comes through. God sends lightning from an otherwise cloudless sky. Yahweh sends fire from heaven that leaves nothing standing—not the wood, not the sacrifice, not even the stones, dust or even the water that had once soaked all of it.

By devastating everything, Yahweh leaves no room for doubt that God is the living God. All of this profoundly rattles Israel. When Elijah invited the Israelites to choose between Yahweh, the god of life, and Baal, the god of death, they remained silent. Now, just as God's fire fell, the Israelites fall and confess that Yahweh is the living God. They also seize and slaughter Baal's remaining prophets.

Frederick Buechner wrote this about the prophet at the center of this spectacle: "[On Mount Carmel] Elijah was like a magician getting ready to pull a rabbit out of a hat. First, he had a trench dug around the altar and filled with water. Then he got a bucket brigade going to give the offering a good dowsing, too. Then as soon as they'd finished, he got them to do it again for good measure. By the time they'd finished a third go-round, the whole place was awash, and Elijah looked like he'd just finished swimming the channel. He then gave Yahweh the word to show his stuff and jumped back just in time. [The fire fell.] The water in the trench fizzed like spit on a hot grill. Nothing was left of the offering

but a pile of ashes and a smell like the Fourth of July. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and at a signal from Elijah, demolished the losing team down to the last prophet. Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh's or Elijah's.

But the sequel to this event (in Chapter 19) seems to have made it clear. Queen Jezebel was determined to get even with Elijah for what he had done to her spiritual advisers, and so to save his skin he went and hid on Mt. Horeb. Again, he gave Yahweh the word, not because he wanted anything set on fire this time but just to keep his hand in. Again the lightning flashed and after that a wind came up that almost blew Elijah off his feet, and after that the earth gave such a shake that it almost knocked him silly. But there wasn't so much as a peep out of Yahweh, and Elijah stood there like a ringmaster when the lion won't jump through the hoop (from Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, pp. 29-30).

Elijah's story is full of lessons about God's faithfulness and an obedient human response to it. Elijah was a kind of troubler to Israel and her king and queen. He, after all, challenged their indifference and infidelity toward God. The prophet boldly confronted their idolatrous worship of many different gods. This caused Ahab and Jezebel to put a bounty on his head, to try to kill him.

Elijah's modern descendants who dare to speak "the word of the Lord," may be unpopular, especially with those, like Ahab, who are in power. People may reject and even persecute believers for daring to speak God's word to various social and political situations. Or they may simply remain indifferent, silent in the face of our pleas to give their whole lives to *the one true God*.

Some who worship the various Baals of our day are willing to persecute God's "troublers." Those who prefer to limp along rather than commit themselves wholeheartedly to the living God will also likely call us "troublemakers." We may even experience rejection from those who claim to follow the Lord.

But in the power of the Holy Spirit, 1 Kings 18 gives Christians courage to speak out and stand up for the word of the Lord. After all, the gods whom the world worships and serves today are just as impotent as Baal.

Only one true God lives; the God whom we know and worship in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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